

## When I Say That My Mother Cooked

I mean that *manang* did, her overworked fingers  
dipping into the wok for a quick baptism of fire, testing  
the sauce for sweetness, knowing that sheer perfection  
would stave off my mother's wrath, earn her a compliment  
and perhaps a hundred Hong Kong dollars to add to her wages.

I called her *dear* in Ilocano, a Filipino language  
she taught me in brief interludes as I grappled with my heritage:  
pre-colonial Cantonese and post-colonial English. Her songs  
would be for playtime, when she would sing to me  
as I was getting ready for sleep:

*Manang Biday, ilukatmo man*

*'Ta bintana ikalumbabam*

*Ta kitaem 'toy kinayawan*

*Ay, matayakon no dinak kaasian*

*Dear Biday, please open*

*Open your window*

*So you can see the one who adores you*

*Oh, I will die if you do not care*

My mother fired her for some reason I never understood,  
though I pleaded for *manang* to stay, and for *manang* who came  
after to never leave me again. They learnt to cook my mother's  
hometown into life – raising Shanghai through steam –  
dishes so pungent you could not tell whether

my mother had left the kitchen at all, *manang* so adept  
at curating flavours she made our Chinese guests praise  
all the chefs in the house, my mother sometimes gracious,  
hollering *manang's* name so they might acknowledge  
her talent and labour, only for her to return

to the kitchen for more cleaning,  
after all the guests had left, after  
I had climbed into bed; *Manang Biday*, a tune  
I still hum whenever I remember her, my *manang*,  
who taught me how to sing.

### **The Translator**

The year sinks into its own bath, blinking  
slowly into breath. *Your face looks like a lit*  
*Confucian lantern* my mother observes –  
as I translate her questions for my lover  
whose Chinese is a riddle well-told.  
Tonight, I empty olive oil into my ears,  
bless both feet with crushed ginger and  
honey to ring in the first year when  
my mother jokes that I am no longer  
her mistake. A translator: *one who is fully*  
*bilingual, refusing soil and other forms of burial.*